

Why New Hampshire's Primary Tradition Is Important

By William Gardner, New Hampshire Secretary of State

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Every four years Americans elect the most powerful leader in the world. We go to the polls and select the man or woman who will be President of the United States. It is probably the most important political decision each of us makes because our choice can affect the lives and happiness of ourselves and our children for years into our future.

DEMOCRACY IS HARD WORK. Protecting American democracy has been a cause of freedom in our nation for over two centuries, and our fellow citizens who have gone before us dedicated their lives, and in some cases lost their lives, in that fight. The principles of democracy and freedom are worth every bit of that fight.

One vital way that we preserve our democracy is to have an election system that allows for the long-said American dream that just about anyone can grow up to be President of the United States. Our boys and girls just starting to go to school should feel that regardless of their wealth or other limitations, they too could become president, or whatever else they aspire to.

For nearly 100 years, the New Hampshire First-In-The-Nation Presidential Primary has had meaning and relevance to American politics. It has allowed for candidates regardless of national standing or financial capability to begin their launch into presidential politics by winning or doing well here. Several aspiring Americans likely would not have become president if they weren't first able to make their case door-to-door, face-to-face, eye-to-eye with New Hampshire voters who meet them at our homes, in our backyards, and on our sidewalks away from the microphones and cameras that create a barrier between human beings.

NEW HAMPSHIRE IS FIRST FOR A REASON. While New Hampshire has had a presidential primary since 1916, and has been first since 1920, it wasn't until 1975 that our status was put into state law. The law now requires that our primary is 7 days or more before similar elections that would challenge our traditional position.

What that law requires is that I look at the nominating events of other states where presidential candidates run, and then set our primary a week ahead of them. Since New Hampshire citizens pay for our primary, we can hold it whenever we wish.

It is up to the candidates themselves to decide whether to campaign here. Ours is the first event where voters go into the privacy of the voting booth to make a choice for a candidate on the ballot. It tells the nation something about their support.

CONSIDER THE ALTERNATIVES. It used to be that delegates for national political conventions were chosen in secret mainly by party leaders, out of view of the public. Would we tolerate that kind of process now? And without having caucuses and primaries in smaller states, larger states would have the exclusive major role in the nominating process.

Worse yet, if a national primary was held, or if the role of small states was eliminated, only the very rich or famous candidates would be able to put on the major campaigns needed for victory or to exceed expectations. In a state like New Hampshire, candidates can run without a large staff or heavy advertising and consulting budgets if they have a message, meet directly with voters, and explain why they should be president. Examples abound.

OPTIONS FOR NEW HAMPSHIRE'S PRIMARY DATE. With Florida moving its primary earlier than originally planned to January 31st, and South Carolina making a move to set its primary ten days earlier to January 21st, that began to limit options for setting our date in January. When officials in Nevada set their caucus for Saturday, January 14th, that left Tuesday, January 3rd as a possibility for us, but Iowa officials tentatively decided that their caucus would be on that day.

My job as NH Secretary of State is to follow our law, which mandates that I set our election 7 days or more before any event that would threaten our traditional lead-off status. So if Nevada does not adjust its caucus date to a later time, I cannot rule out the possibility of a December primary.

We cannot allow the political process to squeeze us into a date that wedges us by just a few days between two major caucus states. Our primary will have little meaning if states crowd into holding their events just hours after our polls have closed.

The date of our primary is decided by state law, not by the rules or desires of political parties. Since Nevada's caucus is similar in the eyes of our statute, it means the New Hampshire primary can be set no later than Saturday, January 7th.

IT'S REALLY UP TO NEVADA. If Nevada does not accept a date of Tuesday, January 17th or later for its caucus, it leaves New Hampshire no choice but to consider December of this year. The dates of Tuesday, December 13th, and Tuesday, December 6th are realistic options, and we have logistics in place to make either date happen if needed. Candidates have been campaigning here, and elsewhere, for months, and it is about time we begin the next stage of the presidential nominating process.

The political parties did not give New Hampshire its presidential primary. Traditionally, it has been the first in the nation for almost a hundred years, and our state law protects our tradition. We have the largest turnout in the country, and our citizens take their roles and obligations seriously.

But the parties do have an important role in that they can discourage other states from trying to leapfrog onto our tradition. Right now, the problem is the date of Nevada. We will respond as we need to in order to honor New Hampshire's tradition, and to keep our primary relevant. Not to do so would allow us to lose an important element of American democracy forever. New Hampshire will not let that happen.

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